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Students embrace avant-garde theatre style

Aldemaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

From the time of the Ancient Greeks, theater as an artistic expression has taken many forms and shapes. Despite more than 2000 years of history, that evolutionary tradition continues to this day. One of the newest forms of theater is called neo-futurism, and is being performed by theater students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. We invited five of them to talk about this new form of expression. They are: Tyson Cole, Jeffrey Bennett, Emily Speight, Amanda Wales and Ryan Wiechmann. For Bennett, a term often used for neo futurism is "disposable art."

"It is creating new art without focusing too much on what has come before by creating new and exciting things right in the space that they are performed," he explained. "There are no characters. There is no setting. Every piece takes place on the stage with the people who are performing those particular pieces." Another term oftentimes used to describe this movement is "honest art," which Wales thinks is a good description for it.

"One of the coolest things I found with neo-futurism is that all of the performers use their own names. So you're never doing a character, you're never acting as someone else," said Wales. "When you actually put on the neo-futurist pieces, the lines will say whoever they were actually written for. Then when you perform you substitute the name of the actors you're using. You are just being yourself in different situations. You're not putting on a persona."

Since most theatergoers are accustomed to plays where someone can be identified as the author, one wonders who really writes these neo-futurist pieces.

"The different members of the neo-futurists write it," said Cole. "They often write from their own personal experiences. That is why it is honest theater because they are talking about themselves, they are talking about what they have gone through and how that relates back to the art." There is no question that this form of theater is wide open for creativity. I asked if the SIUE students had observed this type of theater elsewhere, and were they inspired by it. Wiechmann said that he has seen such performances.

Picture courtesy of Michael Nathe

Emily Speight, Amanda Wales, Tyson Cole, Ryan Wiechmann, and Jeffrey Bennett performing a neo-futurist piece at SIUE.

"Normally the neo-futurists do 30 short plays in 60 minutes," said Wiechmann. "I have seen a 15-minute production with seven plays in high school. And then I have seen YouTube videos. We all watched them when we were preparing for the show. It is really interesting to see how different ages and different groups of people will interpret the pieces and their quality of production." But if the approach to performing is so different, what about the themes of the shows?

"There was one we did in the full show called 'Rape' and it was really serious and played with the idea of people using the word rape in a lighthearted way," said Wales. "For example, if someone were to say, 'That test raped me,' they point out how serious it is and how terrible it can be to compare a small not very tragic event with something as tragic as rape. Then there are also pieces that are very silly like 'Danger Can.' There are really hard hitting personal scenes and then there are pieces that are meant to be ridiculous and make the audience laugh." With such diversity of approaches, one expects that they may even get the audience to participate.

"There is a piece called 'Do What You Will.' It gives the audience permission to do whatever they want on the stage," said Cole. "We talk for about 30 seconds and the rest of the time the audience is invited to come up and do whatever they want."

This type of theater, added Speight, tries to invite people into theater. "It tries to build a relationship with the audience," she said. "It tries to get them involved as much as possible and just let them experience something different that they have never experienced before."

In their first show these students performed 40 pieces in 80 minutes. The question is how these students from a midsize university in the Midwest became interested in such an avant-garde art form in the first place.

"I fell in love with it the very moment we started doing it," said Cole. "It was something I wasn't very sure about, but the honesty of it. I did a piece called 'Stonewall' which is one of my favorite pieces I have ever done and it was just me being able to be completely real and personal with the audience and you could feel the connection with the audience and it was awesome." Like Cole, Bennett immediately loved it.

"There is such a variety in the pieces that we perform. One moment we are trying to make you feel something and the next we are just doing some type of slapstick comedy and the next second we are trying to hit home an important issue that people need to know," he said. "It is kind of like there is something for everybody and at the same time it is subtly teaching you a lot of things."

"I loved it because it's not safe," said Wiechmann. "It's not traditional theater. While there is nothing wrong with traditional theater – it is good to be trained in that approach – with this kind of theater you're opening yourself up and talking about serious issues that need to be talked about."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.